

State Commission pushes for authority over wireless complaints

► Lobbyists have kept the bill from even getting a hearing so far

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PHOENIX — The Arizona Corporation Commission is pushing for authority to investigate consumer complaints about cell phone service.

Although the commission has the power to investigate complaints from users of land lines, it can't resolve complaints involving mobile phone service because of an exemption in state law.

Commission Chairman Mark Spitzer and Attorney General Terry Goddard are backing a bill in the Legislature that would give the commission jurisdiction so it can look into complaints from the 2.5 million wireless customers in Arizona.

But so far wireless company lobbyists have kept the bill from even getting a hearing. They argue the industry's heated competition has kept consumers satisfied.

House Speaker Jake Flake, R-Snowflake, said he has been sitting on the bill, hoping the warring parties could reach a compromise, but he would likely allow it to go forward as early as this week.

The Attorney General's Office says it has received more than 400 complaints in the past two years about wireless practices. The office says wireless complaints rank seventh among the office's top ten consumer complaints.

Often, consumers pay disputed cell phone charges rather than complain because the amounts in question can be as low as \$5, Spitzer and Goddard say.

"This is not government run amok, we are not asking to regulate prices," said Spitzer, a Republican. "The wireless lobbyists say there's no problem and everybody's happy, that they have a voluntary code of con-

duct. There are no teeth in that. I'm just worried about them stealing money and screwing people over."

Wireless carriers are licensed by the Federal Communications Commission and oppose any additional regulation.

They maintain that the wireless industry is so competitive that companies that mistreat consumers simply don't last.

"It costs the average carrier a couple of hundred dollars every time they lose a customer," said Travis Larson, of the Cellular Telecommunication and Internet Association. "So it's in the carrier's best interest to work with ... consumers to keep them happy."

While the bill might not get far this year, commission officials plan to keep pursuing power to advocate for cell phone users.

"I can promise the commission isn't going to give up," said Corporation Commissioner Kris Mayes. "There's a gathering problem with slamming and cramming, and it's better to address the situation now, before it becomes a crisis."